

COMPASSION AND INHUMANITY  
EARLY WARNING AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT  
THE CASE OF RWANDA

by

Howard Adelman

Chopard, Jean-Luc, *Minorities and Prevention of Conflicts: Role of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies*, Geneva: Henry Dunant Institute, 71 pp.

Gorman, Robert F., *Mitigating Misery: An Inquiry Into the Political and Humanitarian Aspects of U.S. and Global Refugee Policy*, New York: University Press of America, 1993, 347 pp.

Minnear, Larry and Thomas G. Weiss, *Mercy Under Fire: War and the Global Humanitarian Community*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1995, 260 pp.

As I neared the end of an intensive research project on early warning and conflict management in Rwanda, I wanted to go back and read some books that dealt with humanitarianism in general rather than documents on the situation in Rwanda and the western response. What could they tell me about the contemporary humanitarian "system" and the principles, policies, and practices that govern the humanitarian regime? In what theoretical and historical context do they see the present apparent escalation in civil wars and ethnic conflict? How do they think the world community is and ought to be responding to such crises?

I chose these three texts, first because a promised review of two of them was overdue, but primarily because they approached the issue by emphasizing three very different actors: 1) an international non-governmental agency, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which played such an important role in Rwanda; 2) the United States which played a very different role than the ICRC; and 3) the United Nations which provided humanitarian aid for several years before, during, and after the genocide, and also sent in and sanctioned the entry of peacekeepers into Rwanda. The Gorman and Minnear/Weiss (MW) books make reference to other parts of the whole system, but Gorman views the United States as the central and leading player - "the United States has been the central figure in efforts to mitigate misery" (108). For MW, the United Nations "has assumed a more central place on the world stage."<sup>(4)</sup><sup>1</sup> Gorman claims that the United States is also the leader in forging and delivering on humanitarian policy (127). MW make no such claim for the UN at present, but it is clear they would

like the UN to assume such a role. The report on the ICRC makes no claims about either its centrality or leadership, except within the Red Cross family of NGOs. However, the ICRC is *primus inter pares* among NGOs, for as MW point out, "it is separate and distinct from those categories of actors because of its specific recognition in international humanitarian law, of which it is also the designated custodian." (49)

How do the three analyses stand up against the reality and horror of Rwanda? What insights do they have in helping us account for the weak and belated response of the international community to the genocide that swept across Rwanda between April and July of 1994?

The three manuscripts are united in their concern with **humanitarian** rather than coercive responses to conflicts; they are all concerned with mercy. All three works predict the world is on a continuing and even escalating trajectory of ethnic violence: "only too often, in every region of the world, the treatment of minorities leads to violent clashes that are bound to escalate and spread geographically through ethnic solidarity and the flow of refugees." (Chopard, 49) Because Gorman and MW offer full books, they begin customarily by providing the setting or "landscape", that is, the current time-space coordinates of the humanitarian system. The spatial dimensions include the concepts and principles on the one hand, and the practices (modes of implementation of those concepts and principles) and players on the other hand.

How do the three works see the current moment in time? For MW, the end of the Cold War offered a critical divide in which the nature and extent of violence has radically altered since 1990. According to this conventional mantra, instead of inter-state conflicts, we now have intra-state conflicts predominating on the world stage since the end of the cold war. Chopard appears to agree: "Today's world is characterized by tension arising from minority problems and ethnic or national claims." (11) Though Gorman agrees that ethnonationalism has reemerged as the decisive political force in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (312), and, given its vast area and the large number of different ethnic groups and nationalities, ethnic violence has significantly increased, ethnic violence has been a constant of history as war and civil strife have been. The dramatic increase in ethnic violence is not because the Cold War ended, but the reason for the end of the Cold War - the instigator imploded. For Gorman, we are not entering a new era

of instability, for, since the second world war, "the more prevalent and bothersome kind of conflict is the internal war which becomes larger and more serious because of international involvement." (38) The domestic instability of states and the conflict over the right to govern have always been the most common source of conflict. This situation was made worse when, during the Cold War, outside states intervened and exacerbated the internal conflict.

Because Gorman obviously finished writing his book in 1991, it might be argued that he would have drawn a different conclusion if he had been writing in 1994, but I believe this to be unlikely. For he clearly saw the increased number of conflicts. Since the demise of one imperial controlling regime, civil wars have been exacerbated, not only because the lid had been taken off in Eastern Europe, but because of outside interventions in these civil wars. In opposition to Yves Sandoz, who wrote the preface to Chopard's report on the ICRC and challenged the realist thesis that wars are inevitable (7), Gorman holds the belief that they are. Wars result when states go beyond their responsibility of maintaining the integrity of their territory and independence to interfere in other states, or, because they fail to rule with humanity, compassion and wisdom to promote the prosperity and social stability for its members. With this failure, civil conflicts erupt. Gorman portrays a Hobbesian world of competing sovereign states, mitigated by rules and institutions promoting cooperative behaviour, which, in turn, mitigate the misery when cooperation breaks down.

For MW, "Things are different now. The transformation in world politics has illuminated the extent of human need and elevated the relative importance of humanitarian considerations. Humanitarian values are coming to be viewed as important in their own right, not as [in Gorman] means to the attainment of political objectives." (5) Chopard goes further. He wants to extend humanitarianism from mitigating misery and managing conflict, to prevention and having the ICRC adopt measures "which would foster understanding between peoples." (11)

Three very different goals: mitigating misery more effectively when there is conflict; a more robust adaptive response to pre-empt crises and respond far more quickly and effectively with an adequate early warning capability - "The wholesale displacement and staggering loss of life confirmed the world's lack of preparedness to deal with major emergencies, either to interpret the early warning signs and to pre-empt crises or to respond quickly and effectively once disaster has

struck;" (224) or attempting to prevent conflict in the first place. Clearly, with these three very different goals of humanitarianism, there is likely to be a very different analysis of what is wrong and how to fix it.

For Gorman, states hold all the key cards in the logic of power, but out of their interests and the humanitarian instincts of their people, they cooperate to create a humanitarian regime to mitigate the misery that arises from power conflicts. For MW, those humanitarian instincts atrophied during the Cold War, and there is a current failure in humanitarian fortitude exacerbated by the limitation in resources in the face of escalating conflicts arising from increased numbers of ethnic conflicts and the absence of a paradigm to replace the Cold War which could justify and energize increased humanitarianism. In other words, Gorman would build on and strengthen our existing humanitarian institutions designed to mitigate misery, while MW push for strengthening the humanitarian regime to manage conflict and not just mitigate misery, though the opportunities to do so have also been accompanied by conditions which make this challenge more formidable. Chopard would go further and take one of the major and the oldest modern institution devoted to mitigating misery into the realm of its prevention.

How do we decide between these three choices? One way is to look at the challenges posed by current history. The problem, however, is that it is the goals that seem to dictate the interpretation and demands of current history. This is clear if you ask whether the world changed fundamentally, or whether the basic elements remain unchanged even as the actors change and create new situations (as Gorman contends), or whether you look to your own history and heritage in order to decide whether to change and what to change in response to external shifts. Should the responsibility be placed, not on responding better to either a dramatically changing or a relatively constant unstable world, but on self-transformation, on building on the traditions of humanitarianism to extend its range and targets regardless of whether we live in a radically transformed and more unstable world, or one which has always been unstable?

Conceiving the world differently, the authors derive different goals, or, having those goals, they reconfigure the world differently. Do these alternate way of framing the world change the values and norms with which each approaches a humanitarian crises. crisis?

<sup>1</sup>. Cf. the book published last year by Thomas Weiss, but this time with David Forsythe and Roger Coate, *The United Nations and*

*Changing World Politics* (Boulder: Westview, 1994), where the arguments are put forth about the emerging centrality of the UN to conflict around the globe.